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Participatory Learning Environments and Collective Meaning Making Practice

Erin Reilly

Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Many teachers are curious about changing technologies and teaching practices, wondering which resources to use and to what effect. We believe that teachers' questions are best addressed by working backwards, so we begin by collectively identifying the kinds of students they want to emerge from their classrooms. Teachers play a monumental role in facilitating opportunities for students to become critical thinkers, proactive citizens, and creative contributors to the world. In our rapidly shifting digital and social landscape, unequal access to experiences that help build the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute in these evolving environments can prevent youth from meaningful participation in them. This "participation gap," we believe, cannot be wholly addressed when teachers themselves are not afforded these same opportunities to grow and learn.

The new media literacies (NMLs) are a set of social skills and cultural competencies that students and teachers need to acquire in order to fully participate in this new media environment. NMLs shift the focus of traditional literacy from individual expression to community involvement. They offer ways of both thinking and doing that recruit the traditional literacies of reading and writing into new kinds of literacy practices. They also are skills that are technology agnostic and emphasize cultural practices and mental dispositions that adapt easily to changes in resources and opportunities.

Describing how learning and pedagogy must change in this new cultural and multimedia context, the New London Group (2000) argues that "literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies." (9). Indeed, they describe how "the proliferation of communications channels and me-

dia supports" sets up a need for "creating the learning conditions for full social participation" (9). The media-literacy movement has effectively taken the lead in this regard by teaching students to analyze the media they consume and to view themselves as both consumers and producers of media. However, this learning often is relegated to electives or to after-school programs rather than being integrated across curricula. The new media literacies allow us to think in new ways about the processes of learning, because they reflect a shift from a top-down model of learning to one that invokes all voices and all manners of thinking and creating new knowledge.

By integrating the new media literacies across the curriculum, both teachers and students alike gain the ability to make and reflect upon media and, in the process, acquire important skills in teamwork, leadership, problem solving, collaboration, brainstorming, communication, and creativity. The Common Core Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, but not how teachers should teach. Following Horst and colleagues (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, & Robinson, 2009), Project New Media Literacies is currently pursuing new research called PLAY! (Participatory Learning and You!).

PLAY! refers to Participatory Learning and You, a new approach to professional development. It uses the concept of ecology to describe the "characteristics of an overall technical, social, cultural, and place-based system, in which the components are not decomposable or separable" (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, and Robinson, 2009, 26). With past NML research, we have had success in integrating the new media literacies into core subjects taught during the school year. NML's teachers' strategy guides are the product of new possibilities that group action has shifted the focus on literacy develop-

ment from being primarily about individual achievement to being more about community involvement and the ability to exist and thrive in increasingly public and distributed activity systems. In line with this shift, our vision for how to support the literacy needs of today's youth focuses on figuring out ways to bring more collaborative and collective meaning-making practices into the formal classroom.

By designing and implementing a participatory learning environment, new teaching practices will help create a...

- Space yielding heightened motivation and new forms of engagement through meaningful play and experimentation;
- Place where real world situations and considerations guide authentic learning that feels relevant to students' realities and interests;
- Culture that nurtures creativity with media, tools and practices;
- Community designed for co-configured expertise, where educators and students pool their knowledge and share in the tasks of teaching and learning;
- Context that situates itself within a larger learning eco-system.

Currently, educators make distinctions between "formal" and "informal" learning. Lying outside these boundaries are the spontaneous, interest-driven activities young people pursue during their free time. These activities are fueled by a passion and an excitement that any teacher would love to see in the classroom. Young people learn negotiation skills as they move between communities with differing social norms, for instance; they learn to voice their opinion and also to listen to others as they participate in discussions focused on arriving at a mutually agreed-upon framing of an issue to be displayed on the main page content of Wikipedia. Students' interest-driven practices can illuminate and inform what is taught in both formal and informal contexts, and classroom content can help learners apply new knowledge to their own interest-driven experiences.

There are many routes to—and diverse forms of— participation, and the goal of giving more people the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for becoming full participants in the world is more of a long-term endeavor. It is a commitment—at each grade level and in all subject areas and in the com-

munity—to support the development of participation skills for engaging with the world critically and creatively, making meaningful contributions to their culture, and developing a fully realized and empowered civic identity.

This is our vision for PLAY, a next generation school model that can take advantage of technology, accelerate academic performance, and increase college readiness while using the value of play as a guiding principle in the educational process, one which is too often shut out in our focus on assessment and learning outcomes.

References

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